

Wisconsin Folks: Masters of Tradition



Christine Okerlund lives in Wittenberg, a Ho Chunk settlement in north-central Wisconsin. Born in Milwaukee in 1947, Christine is of Ojibwe descent, with earlier generations of her family coming from Blind River, Ontario.

Christine specializes in porcupine quill embroidery on birch bark, making baskets, earrings, medallions or wall hangings decorated with quilled designs. Quillwork on bark is a traditional art native to Woodland tribes of the Great Lakes and predates the use of beads. Christine likens the quilling process to embroidery, a technique she had been practicing before learning quilling in the 1980s.

To embroider with quills, Christine must first obtain a porcupine and harvest its quills, cleaning and then sorting them according to size. Some she dyes with bright colors; others she leaves with their natural white and black shading. She sews the quills onto circles of bark that will serve as fitted tops for birch bark containers, quilling either the top alone or the sides of the container as well.

The designs Christine favors are traditional or contemporary representations of flowers, such as the trillium or rose, and designs popular within the Native American Church. Church members in Wisconsin use her birch bark containers to hold the peyote chief, the ritual sacrament. Christine is honored that her baskets are used for this purpose and she makes sure that the inner lining of her containers is as smooth and finished as possible, using a tooth edge design for the finish.

Christine has had several apprentices. Not only do they learn how to work with quills but also the steps of creating the birch bark object. For example, to create a fitted basket, the apprentice must harvest the bark, cut the patterns, sew the bark, line the inner cover and bottom, sew sweet grass around the rim, and fit the top to the bottom. Christine is always delighted when the apprentice is not afraid of picking quills off a dead porcupine. A challenge for apprentices is to learn creativity in designing. Another challenge is to pay constant attention to the fragility of the bark while sewing the basket together.

"They say that when the wild roses are in bloom, that's the time that birch is ready to come off the tree." – Christine Okerlund